
**In a Galaxy Far, Far Awry
Before They Were Famous: Reef**

Liam Gibbs

THE STORY SO FAR...

Issue 1: *Serial Fiction Sideshow*, available in the hearts of one and all

Issue 2: *Home Sweet Home Invasion*, available in the hearts of one and all

Issue 3: *Technophobia*, available in the h—you're starting to see a pattern here, aren't you?

Issue 4: *Armageddon Trigger Finger*, available in...hey... your heart. And one and all's too.

Issue 5: *The Genetic Equation*, available blah blah blah.

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We cool? We cool.

Hey, man. This story here? Might not
be in its original form. Just to let you
know, there might be slight changes to
this later on.

THAT ONE THAT REEF IS IN

February 26, 9107. 6:56 p.m. (Galactic Standard Time).

Two prison guards led Devon Holbrek down the soulless hallway. Around his hands, Holbrek wore handcuffs that inhibited him from using his inborn hyperability. Like he had any interest in his state. Were they afraid he'd blow something up? Heh.

Actually, given what he'd done in December, that wasn't far off the mark. And he was drunk. Anything was possible when he drank. Alcohol helped him reach for the stars.

Clad in his tight, prison-issue orange jumpsuit with prison-issue sponsor logos and prison-issue sponsor-logo buzzing lights, Holbrek stumbled down the dank basement corridor of prison-issue bleakness in this prison-issue-depression prison. Gray was everywhere. "Hey, guysssss," he slurred at his two escorts. One prison guard recoiled from his rancid breath when that *S* hissed into the circulating air. He blundered a step and faltered, but the guards kept him on his feet. "Where we headed? You two doin' anythin' later? Or drinkin' anythin'? I'm down for a few. You're buyin'." Hic. He laughed at his joke. Didn't even know what the joke was, but he laughed at it. And then almost puked. The laugh tasted like a

cotton ball on fire, smelled like a mothball on fire. “What *is* this meetin’ for?”

“We don’t know, Holbrek,” the Haralsian guard said. He tightened his python grip on Holbrek’s arm. “The People Who Matter don’t tell us anything.”

Every door in this corridor chimed and faded to dust when Holbrek and the guards passed on boots that clicked like gunshots down the passage. Latent-technology doors. L-tech objects were stored in computer memory until they were summoned for use, and every l-door in this hall had a fit of fear when Holbrek and his escorts wandered past. Each got startled and hid in a disguise of bits and bytes. When Holbrek swiveled to face the doors, he felt vertigo, as if he spun the world around with his nose but when his face stopped moving, the world kept spinning so fast he saw speed lines.

Holbrek exercised as much mobility as a marionette. He had gotten his hands on some lowbrow hooch in the brink. As a result, he couldn’t see straight, the spinning world screened behind a beige tint of whiskey. His head felt as if it had as much substance as a balloon animal.

The escorts led him through an l-door into a bureaucratic room where, like a panel of judges, three military occifers sat at an imposing oak table. Heh. Occifers. He’d actually thought that word.

So this was a military affair. Reminded Holbrek of his latest legal hearings. Or the last time he tried driving. He lurched in, hiccupped, faltered—woulda fallen to the tiled floor except

his two escorts braced him by the elbows. Woulda shoulda coulda. Probably shoulda. Woulda saved his ex, Frieda, a ton of misery after his failed stab at partial custody of their two children, Silas and Portia, who didn't want anything to do with him anyway. Turned out waging a legal war from jail was a toughie. Shouldn'a.

He hiccupped again. Tasted like smoky soil. The good stuff. Well, as good as smuggled alkiefhol got. His eyes flittering at half mast, he allowed the escorts to plunk him down on a hover chair opposite the judges. It squeaked.

“Hey, buckos.” He treated the judges to his toothiest smile. He recognized one of them, a warrant officer who was present at his last military post, where he'd gone...where he'd done his *thing*. Warrant Officer Trewellis. That was the guy's name.

One of the escorts leaned toward the hyperstasis cuffs. “Handcuffs, acknowledge. Unlock.” The cuffs obeyed and clacked away from Holbrek's hands. Phew. Unharnessed, his wrists throbbed. He rubbed both hands of their twisting red ache. If the guards wanted to remove his hyperability from use, they could have just given him a Hyperthesis pill. Or just punched him in the gut.

Holbrek leaned back in the chair, tended one shoulder blade into its flattened upholstery, and whacked the table with a palm. “So you're prob'ly wonderin' why I gathered you here today.” He loved that line. Comedy genius. Ow. Pain electrified his hand. As graceless as he moved, he'd hit the table with his

knuckles more than his palm. Crock. That was his drinking hand, too. How was he supposed to sneak a flask around with a sprain? Fate, you harsh mistress!

“You’re dismissed,” Trewellis said to the guards. No longer a warrant officer. A second lieutenant, Holbrek deduced from the shoulder patch. Holy piss, the lights were way bright in this room. Made him want to take a tiny nap right here on this table.

Holbrek was rubbing his electrified hand but mock-saluted the two departing escorts. He ended up chopping himself across the eye. Trewellis waited for the two to exit before he regarded Holbrek with a look that grunted disdain. “Mr. Holbrek, are you drunk? Again?”

“Like a skunk,” Holbrek said. Well, *wanted* to say but he delivered a regal burp instead. He leaned more into his chair. Take that, sober people. Man, he was immature when he was drunk.

“Unacceptable.” Trewellis snapped with a sneer like a mother when she sent her disobedient imps to bed without dinner. “The Intergalactic Protection military conduct manual dictates a soldier only be sloshed on Family Heirloom Vodka Quickie events.” He checked a datasheet calendar on the wall. “Oh. Which happens to be today. Lucky break, Holbrek.”

“I ain’t one of your soldiers no more,” Holbrek fired back at Trewellis. Nope, both Trewellises. Nope, one now. Crock, the twin Trewellises kept wavering together and apart in woolly images. Sound warbled in Holbrek’s ear. His head almost

upended onto the table. Who said Trewellis could have a twin anyway?

“Let’s start this meeting. I’m getting intoxicated just from your fumes. My name, if you can remember it in this state, is Trewellis. I served as your commanding officer when you…” He sighed. “Forget it. You probably don’t even remember your own name.”

“I sure do!” Holbrek slapped the table. He guffawed and burped at the same time. Elegant. “You said it enough times.”

“Mr. Holbrek, you have recently—” Trewellis interrupted himself to wait for Holbrek’s record-breaking burp to subside. “Mr. Holb—” And then the next burp. The burp’s rev subsided, so he continued. “Mr. Holbre—” A resurgence.

For ten seconds.

Trewellis waited for the burp to rear its awesome roar again. When it didn’t, he felt safe to continue. “Mr. Holbrek, you have recently been found guilty in a military court of some serious charges proffered against you by your direct commanding officer at the time—”

“Which was you.”

“—and these charges landed you in a martial prison for a sentence no less than eighty years.”

Holbrek lunged forward for a high five, which, he estimated from Trewellis’s expression, was not the best idea.

Trewellis blinked at him. “You’ve been serving that sentence since August eighteenth of last year. Charges of operating a transport while drunk and killing one Salvador

Bravados are still due for deliberation in a *civilian* court on April first, 9108.”

“April Fools, am I right?” Holbrek whipped up his hand for another high five but for some reason he held up three hands. And they buzzed in and out of focus like those Trewellises. So did the tranquility of his gut, which now buzzed like flies in a marshland.

“Put your hand down, Holbrek,” Trewellis snapped.

Holbrek did. All three hands...no, two...three...two-and-a-half...“Well, that response wasn’t ladylike.”

“I’m not a—” Trewellis’s expression shifted gears. Seemingly to calm himself, he reached for a cookie on a plate. The words DR. DIABETES’S COOKIES, MOST SUGARY DESSERTS THIS SIDE OF A COMA spun sickeningly around the plate’s rim.

After a bite and a heavenly flutter of eyelids, Trewellis said, “Holbrek, you’ve amassed a laundry list of charges against you, and you’re not expected to resurface from incarceration ever. I mean *ever*. You’d be lucky to get a peek of civilization as often as a groundhog spots his shadow.”

“I hired a horrible defense attorney.” Holbrek sniffed his hand. Pee-yoo. “This smell like butt sweat?” He forced his hand on Trewellis. Fingers poked Trewellis’s cheeks.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have selected your defense based on his”—Trewellis cleared his throat as if to give a quote-unquote—“barroom performance.’ Get your finger out of my nostril.”

“The dude downed eight shots in our first meeting and

didn't miss a beat." Holbrek sniffed his hand one last time and then made an ugly face. "It would have been apostasy. He's a living legend."

"You're not allowed to use that term unless referring to our sponsor, Living Legend Bowling Shoes"—Trewellis slapped a shoe onto the table—"the official bowling shoe of Intergalactic Protection." Down the shoe went.

"Do you wear those in combat?"

"I'm not here to discuss what I may or definitely may wear in combat, Holbrek."

The man to the right of Trewellis was a military lawyer: Gharalgian race, average height, no rank but plenty of suit, tie, leather briefcase, and stare. "Mr. Holbrek, my name is Rizztrog Lawyer. Yes, my family name is Lawyer. Makes for some confusing introductions."

"You need a hug?"

Lawyer clacked his briefcase unlocked and reached through its leather l-top to grab a datasheet, which he activated and set in front of Holbrek. "You're going up against two life sentences in addition to the life sentence handed to you by a martial court. You're in serious trouble."

"*But*"—Trewellis tilted his head, widened his eyes, and waited for Holbrek's next burp to finish—"we have an offer that, as they say, you can't refuse. That burp was impressive."

Holbrek was about to unleash another burp but he swallowed it back and sobered in a snap. Okay, okay, half sobered in a plod. "As long as it's got nothing to do with those

shoes, I'm all ears."

Lawyer squared his briefcase on the table. "I'm representing you in an offer Intergalactic Protection is prepared to offer you."

"Offer, offer, offer, offer." Holbrek found this funny. The others didn't. They probably also didn't find the show *Homicide Harry* funny. It wasn't supposed to be. It was a murder drama. It was also a kid's cartoon. "Offer, offer, of—*brrrraaaapppp*—fer."

"Mr. Holbrek, Intergalactic Protection has come across some information concerning an...adversary...that we don't have the power to counter. We need your unique hyperability to ensure we can. Frankly, we need you to stop a genocide. We're offering to lift your sentences, grant you immunity from all charges, in exchange for your help. We're also going to replace your next-door neighbor's garden that she accuses you of backing over."

Now Holbrek sobered up. That veil disappeared like a fugue state lifting. The world was no longer tinged in sepia. He needed drunkenness, his brain clutching at it desperately. Sobriety was best experienced with his eyes closed, and it smacked him like a woman scorned. "Mrs. Braft's garden had it coming with those cheap daisies and half-eaten petunias." He hated sobriety. It reminded him of how much he'd upended his life with Frieda and the kids. Also reminded him of Urgriss at prison. Dude looked like a fish with legs and smelled like old caulking.

Behind the brigadier, an advertisement for Space Cow's latest burger, the Gristlewich, blurred into coherence. Thanks to the ad, Holbrek didn't want to eat for a few weeks.

"Let's start with the details." Trewellis breathed, traded conspiratorial eyes with Lawyer, traded them with the other guy, and began, "In little more than two years, our galaxy will face a threat we're unable to neutralize. We don't have all the details or an exact date, but we know this threat is looming."

Holbrek gasped. "Your mother-in-law!"

Trewellis ignored the comment. "We know it involves a device that your unique hyperability is suited to withstand."

Holbrek threw a hand at Lawyer. "*His* mother-in-law."

"And so, in exchange for your help, you will be exempted of your charges, of your life sentences. As you know, the man you killed, Bravados, is a well-connected mob boss."

Holbrek's hands flurried around his head. "His mother-in-law's mother-in-law!"

"And your freedom comes with a price on your head. So we're also offering a reidentification to protect you while we prepare for this threat. You will no longer be Devon Holbrek. You will bear a new name and join a unit Intergalactic Protection will soon assemble called the Good Guys. This unit will be an offshoot of Intergalactic Protection, specifically placed to allow the inclusion of hyperpeople. A criminal leader will soon unite some very powerful criminal organizations, and we need the Good Guys to counteract him."

Lawyer raised a hand. "By the way, you don't know how

dangerously close you are about my mother-in-law.”

At the unit’s name, Holbrek chortled. A sober chortle this time, which still brought some of that oaken flavor up. “The Good Guys? Is this threat I’m supposed to counter called the Bad Guys?”

“No, they’re not the direct threat.”

Holbrek was stunned. “They’re really the Bad Guys?” He raised a jovial eyebrow that nobody matched. “Okay, moving on. Why are you calling this unit the Good Guys?”

“We aren’t. Their leader, Matross Legion, will call them that on their maiden mission. He won’t be able to come up with anything better.”

“The creative sort, is he?” Holbrek’s brain reeled from too many questions. First of all, if he could have one of those cookies. “Wait wait wait. ‘Won’t be able to?’ ‘Will soon unite?’ You mean this hasn’t happened yet? How can you know this? A clairvoyant? No, that’s impossible. You can’t have hyperabilities in the military.” He grabbed a cookie, placed his feet on the table, and nibbled. “A reader’s poll?” He peered down at the cookie. “What am I eating here, oatmeal and crumpled-up rubber?”

“Our source is...above your clearance. Which is civilian since your termination.”

“Okay, so will this Good Guy outfit include women, too?”

Trewellis shifted his eyes away, looked ashamed, sighed. “Unfortunately, we still can’t go that far. ChugSport still backs

us a healthy sum, and they're very prejudiced. They don't like women in the military. Affects their product sales among the bigot demographic."

Lawyer raised a tumbler of blue slosh and proclaimed, "ChugSport, the choice of the next generation, now in Blastin' Blueberry and Electrolyte Bitter Melon!" He smiled and slurped up some of the...drink?

"Got that out of your system?" Holbrek asked.

"I just made eighty moolahs." Lawyer slurped back more of the blue muck. A tentacle of slime slithered down his lip and wiped his chin for him.

Trewellis took his cue to elaborate on a previous answer. "We're not allowed to divulge our source, but he had a clipboard so he was trustworthy. The point is we need you in this offshoot unit. You will join under your new identity. While there, you will not breathe a word about your past or your hyperability. Everything about your position is classified. Sealed with a rubberstamp. You will not even be able to *use* your hyperability. The energy you've stored up is directly suited toward withstanding this device we mentioned. Once you accomplish your mission, your time with the Good Guys will end and you'll walk away a free man."

At the words *free man*, the temperature ticked up a couple degrees. So did Holbrek's posture. "And I can get this deal in writing?" He looked at Lawyer, then at Trewellis, and then finally at the third man who hadn't so much as peeped since this he'd entered this sterile room. "Pipe down over there."

The third man jolted as if Holbrek's words had slapped him awake.

"What's your stake in this?" Holbrek jutted his chin at him.

The third man stammered, but his words finally resolved. "I'm a witness to your decision. I will cosign your acceptance."

Holbrek flipped the offer around in his head. These guys looked serious. They *were* serious, at least serious enough to offer *him* this. Holbrek didn't see much alternative *but* to accept. Genocide? What if that genocide ended up Frieda's doorstep?

"Fine." If this would allow Holbrek to save his family—to get out of that hellhole they'd stuffed him in, which couldn't tell Steakhouse Saturday from Wallaby Wednesday—he'd sign anything. "So a hyperability army. Hrmph. Does that mean media names and media outfits? I'm not big on the media-circus thing. But throw in a new pair of jeans and I'm in." He didn't even read the offer. The datasheet on the table was already activated to a page with an *X* over a dotted line. "Let's get this reidentification going." He finger-painted his signature along that dotted line and punctuated his signature by clicking the LIKE button.

"Wise choice, Mr. Holbrek," Trewellis said with a smile as Mr. Witness slid the datasheet toward himself and signed underneath Holbrek's autograph. Behind Trewellis, the Space Cow ad gave way to one for Tin Can Automotive.

"What other choice have I got? The alternative means I'm forced to violate several rules of culinary decency once a

week. This prison made an eighth day specifically to serve more bizarre concoctions.” The thinker-uppers here loved their alliteration, and thus Hot Sauce Horsemeat Hindays was born. “They *do* let me keep an African violet in my cell. It brings together the open-concept toilet corner.” Holbrek grabbed the datasheet and scanned down the fine print, right to the bottom of the mumbo jumbo where Mr. Witness’s signature had introduced him as Lieutenant Colonel Bailey Reef.

“Now all that’s left is for you to pick a new name,” Trewellis said.

Holbrek didn’t look up. “I get to pick my identity? Tight ship you run here.” He pursed his lips. “I think I’ll take Reef. But a first name a little manlier than Bailey.”

Want more? Course you do. These stories are like popcorn: what good is one handful?

Good thing there *is* more. Check out the story this directly ties into at <http://bit.ly/iagffa1> and then weep. Weep for joy.

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